

Matera. Candidate for European "Capitale of Culture" 2019

Stanislao Pugliese (October 01, 2013)



The competition is fierce: Torino, Venice, Bergamo, Ravenna, Urbino, Siena, PerugiaAssisi (as they style themselves for this), Terni, L'Aquila, Amalfi, Bari, Brindisi, Catanzaro and Palermo. Against these "pezzi grossi" the city of Matera in Basilicata has put itself forward as a candidate for the title of European Capital of Culture for 2019.

In 1985 former actress and Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercuri and her French counterpart Jack Lang created the idea of selecting a "city of culture." Athens was, unsurprisingly, the first, followed by Florence in 1986. Since then the honor has gone to two other Italian cities: Bologna in 2000 and Genoa in 2004. Starting in 2000, the European Union decided to award the honor to two or more cities in a single year. Hence 2019 will be devoted to one Italian city and one in Bulgaria (most likely Sofia).

The city of Matera and the region of Basilicata have thrown their hat into the ring, seeing this as an opportunity to showcase their city to the world. Not that the world hasn't already been seduced by



Matera. In 1993, the UN and UNESCO added Matera to its [list of "World Heritage" sites](#). [2] Panoramas of the city are extraordinary: with the houses of white tufo and roofs of weathered grey tile rather than the tradition red terracotta, the city seems to be both part of Italy and strikingly different, something from another time and place.

Matera is perhaps best known for its "sassi"; the pre-historic stone formations and caves which were inhabited by the peasants. In the centro storico, there are two neighborhoods: the Sasso Barisano and the Sasso Caveoso. These simple dwellings were used as late as 1954, when the national government of Alcide De Gasperi decided the sassi were an affront to the image of a modern Italy and forced the peasants to abandon their sassi and live in modern houses built higher on the hill of the town. One such habitation, the Casa Grotta di Vico Solitario, restored to its former rustic condition, displays the contract between the owner and the government, which paid the peasant and his family the princely sum of 42,000 lire (about US \$30). (Another can be visited online at www.anticmatera.it [3])

Americans though, are probably not familiar with Matera and the region of Basilicata, which sent relatively few emigrants to America compared to nearby Campania and Calabria. They may recall that the Jewish anti-fascist intellectual and member of Giustizia e Liberta', Carlo Levi, was sent to confino there by Mussolini's regime in 1935. Out of that experience, Levi wrote "Christ Stopped at Eboli", first published in 1945 and then made into a film by Francesco Rosi in 1979. (At the time, the fascist regime had re-named Basilicata by its ancient Roman name "Lucania.") Levi, who was born in Turin and lived most of his life in Rome, is buried in Aliano, not far from Matera, a sign of his love and esteem for the very different civilization he came to know. The cover of the latest edition of "Christ Stopped at Eboli," published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, has a photo by Mario Carbone of Matera.

Carbone had accompanied Carlo Levi to Basilicata and Matera in 1960. For a variety of striking photos of Matera, including a few by Carbone and others from the vanishing world of the 1950s and 1960s, visit [>>>](#) [4]

In 1964 the poet, writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini travelled to Jerusalem to scout locations for his next film, "Il Vangelo secondo Matteo". He returned from the Holy Land dismayed: Jerusalem was "too modern" for his film. A friend told him to visit Matera and there he found the inspiration for what I would consider the greatest religious film of all time. (Directly, ironically enough, by a gay, atheist Communist.) "Matera is where the sun shines," Pasolini later wrote, "the real sun, the fiercely ancient sun." In Pasolini's film, the streets, alleys, houses, sassi and tufo of Matera become living protagonists, just as much as the charismatic (from the Greek "kharisma" or gift of the gods) Barcelona actor Enrique Irazoqui (Christ) or the director's own mother, Sussana Paolini as the elder Mary. (In 2011, Irazoqui was named an honorary citizen of Matera.) Domenico Notarangelo, a "Roman centurion" extra in Pasolini's film recalls the director and offers his photos from the set of Matera in 1964 at www.youtube.com/watch?v=28MkAUADUNQ [5]

Forty years later, the actor and director Mel Gibson filmed his controversial "The Passion of the Christ" in Matera.

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[2] <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/670>

[3] <http://www.anticmatera.it>

[4] <http://www.pinterest.com/italianholidays/the-mystical-beautiful-matera/>



[5] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28MkAUADUNQ>

[6] http://people.hofstra.edu/stanislao_pugliese/main.htm